

## Thomas W. Jones, PhD

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Kay Alicyn Ferrell, PhD  
*via* kay.ferrell@comcast.net

Dear Dr. Ferrell:

I am honored to write a letter of support for your nomination of the late Dr. Verna L. Hart to the Hall of Fame: Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field, at the American Printing House for the Blind.

Many words describe Dr. Hart, but especially four resonate with me. One is *pioneer*. Another is *mentor*. The third is *broad-based*. The fourth is *ripples*.

At George Peabody College for Teachers, now part of Vanderbilt University, Dr. Hart founded and directed a masters-level program preparing teachers for children with multiple disabilities, including those with deaf-blindness, a rapidly growing population in the wake of the 1964–65 rubella epidemic. Such programs were rare at the time—few schools accepted children with multiple disabilities, especially when their disabilities included any combination of health issues, hearing loss, intellectual impairment, physical disabilities, and vision impairment.

As part of her graduate students' preparation Dr. Hart took groups of them to schools for the blind to provide week-long summer workshops for deaf-blind children and their families, sometimes the only education those families would receive. Dr. Hart also established and directed an innovative preschool classroom at Peabody for children with multiple disabilities. It not only provided services for complicated young children with multiple disabilities, it provided hands-on experiences for her graduate students.

Dr. Hart not only provided an innovative top-quality education for graduate students preparing to teach children with multiple disabilities, including impaired vision, she also established developmentally-based assessment measures and teaching procedures for that population. Those activities lead to her book *Beginning with the Handicapped*, a textbook for graduate students and a guidebook for parents of children with multiple disabilities.

In the 1960s few public schools provided services for children with even single disabilities, especially if they included intellectual impairment. Dr. Hart began her higher-education career around the time federal funding began addressing that gap. She was among the first special-education professionals to develop skills in writing successful proposals for federal grants. The funding supported her ground-breaking programs at Peabody and later at the University of Pittsburgh. Throughout her career her grant-writing and project-reporting skills benefitted generations of graduate students, the children they would teach, and those children's families.

In 1972 Dr. Hart left Peabody for a faculty position at the University of Pittsburgh. There she expanded her impact in at least two ways. First, she extended her masters-level teacher-preparation focus to embrace early childhood special education, an innovation in 1972. Although some—not all—public and private schools and agencies served some school-age children with disabilities, preschool and infant programs for them were rare. Again, Dr. Hart obtained federal grant funds to prepare teachers and leadership personnel for emerging programs. Her program's scope included early childhood and infant education addressing all disability areas, including single and multiple disabilities. Presciently, she also included severe disabilities, a special education field that grew exponentially after 1975, when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The next year Dr. Hart helped the University of Pittsburgh establish a teacher-preparation program in severe disabilities, parallel to her program in early childhood special education.

At the University of Pittsburgh Dr. Hart also expanded her personnel preparation focus to include more doctoral students. She was dissertation-committee chair, academic advisor, and informal mentor to students who went on lead graduate programs in early childhood special education, severe or multiple disabilities, vision impairment, and deaf-blindness, write successful federal grant proposals for those programs, and mentor their own doctoral students. Other doctoral students at the University of Pittsburgh—including those focused on hearing loss, developmental and physical disabilities, and vision impairment—took her courses and benefitted from her mentoring. She served on many of their dissertation committees.

Throughout her higher-education career, spanning four decades, Dr. Hart provided in-service training and workshops for teachers of deaf-blind children and those with other disabilities. She also spoke at meetings of those children's parents and provided workshops for them. Often her remarks were unscripted, but she always spoke in a way that resonated with her audience. Like Dr. Hart's students, professionals and parents were amazed at the breadth of her knowledge and the extent of her helpfulness. They felt they had benefited from the information she provided and wanted to hear her again.

These few paragraphs about Dr. Verna L. Hart describe someone who pioneered at least two special education fields related to vision impairment. She was a mentor to countless students at the masters level, who went on to teach especially complicated or young children with disabilities or to work at agencies providing services for them or their families. Those facilities include the American Printing House for the Blind, schools and other agencies serving the blind and visually impaired, and centers for children and adults with deaf-blindness. Dr. Hart's students, many now retired, benefited from her knowledge, skills, and mentoring. Her doctoral students have transmitted much of her extraordinary knowledge and skills to further generations of teachers, teacher educators, and parents.

Many teachers, teacher educators, children, and families benefited directly from Dr. Hart. Countless others benefited indirectly, and the ripples continue. She was a leader and now is a legend in several special education fields, including vision impairment. Her work merits her election to the Hall of Fame: Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas W. Jones", written in a cursive style.

Thomas W. Jones  
Professor Emeritus, Gallaudet University